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Papa Lyman Remembers

The War, Paper, and the Computer by Lyman Newlin (Book Trade Counsellor)

In my November column I more or less signed off on the Great Depression but since that promise a few things have come to mind so I'll start with them. Don't be surprised if I come back to G.D. again. Without a beginning nothing has an ending, to paraphrase a *Sprichwort* from German 101.

I have several times mentioned the ridiculously low list prices of books published sixty years ago. These prices remained low for a longer period than most commodities due in part, at least, to the fact that publishers in general did not increase their prices as long as pre-war inventory lasted. Even after that was exhausted, new printings remained relatively inexpensive to produce because of huge paper stock inventories left over from wartime quotas. An example: **Blakiston**, an established and important medical book publisher, had been given a large paper quota by the War Production Office because its *American Red Cross Handbook* was used widely by the armed forces. **Doubleday**, a trade publisher, found itself in short paper supply. So Doubleday bought Blakiston in 1944 and presto — plenty of paper for its general trade line. But Doubleday had no stomach for medical publishing (please excuse the poor and non-intended pun) and by 1954 disposed of Blakiston to **McGraw-Hill** which had served the nation well by increasingly publishing technical books. Blakiston's acquisition thus elevated McGraw into a leading medical publisher.

Wartime paper was often of low quality and it took several years for publishers to dispose of certain books which were printed on it. It was not uncommon to open a shipment of backlist titles as late as 1950 and find books printed on "war-time" paper. But soon all materials and production costs had climbed enough to cause noticeable increases in per-page average, especially on trade titles. As to how these increases equated with library materials purchasing budgets is a subject which I will leave to experts.

I can't leave the war period without re-

calling a direct hit by a German submarine which sank a ship carrying a large shipment of individual volumes of Shakespeare's plays and other classics. They had been offered at special prices after German bombs almost completely destroyed Paternoster Row, the center of London's publishing industry. "Papa" (Adolph) Kroch had agreed to split the consignment with **Follett's** but the submarine canceled that transaction. At the time I had no premonition that within a dozen years I would be working for Kroch's and Brentano's, by which time Papa had handed over the reins to his son, Carl.

I could carry on at length about the changes in publishing that took place after the war, but there is quite a sizeable literature collection on this subject, especially as to how publishing changed from a gentleman's profession to a commercial venture. In *Books and Publishers* by **Michael Lane** and **Jeremy Booth** (Lexington Books, 1980) we read: "Even when they acknowledge that they are engaged in business, as that term is commonly used, they (publishers) nevertheless tend to hold firmly to a belief that the economics of books are distinctive and different, so much as to preclude the operation of book publishing along conventional business lines." That statement was written before **Robert Maxwell**, **Paramount**, **Reed**, **General Cinema** and other conglomerates made earlier **RCA**, **CBS**, **Xerox**, **Litton** efforts to gain entry into and to capitalize on the exploding publishing industry look like Junior Achievement Projects.

The computer accompanied and aided these takeovers because with computers the human brain which heretofore was an essential to publishing was replaced by cybernation. Here's an example: During WWII thousands of publishing staples were declared temporarily out of stock. As late as ten years after the war ended, publishers were sending booksellers notification of reprints. I'll never forget a card from Macmillan which I received in 1955 advising that an abridgment of *Frasier's Golden Bough* which had been ordered in 1945 was again available. Compare that report to the response from Random House in 1972 after I received a note on an invoice that Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom*

was "not our publication." When I complained to **Bennett Cerf** he apologized, with chagrin, that the title had been "T.O.S." for an extended time and after two years such titles were automatically purged from the list. If this can happen to one of the most widely acclaimed titles by a top author what happens to the thousands of titles which go out of print every year? Some of them are most certainly going to be sought after in years to come!

You can have fun today if you want to ask a publisher's customer service department about the availability of a book which you are holding in your hand and which has the firm's imprint on the title page but it is sans International Standard Book Number. Chances are you will hear the voice of a clerk with all of six month's experience tell you "that is not our publication" with an implication that you must be badly misinformed.

Is this ability to lose track of slow selling titles a blessing in disguise? Can we hope that electronic publishing will lose much of the needless junk that is being increasingly published? To put it more politely I quote from *Inside Publishing* by **Bill Adler** (Bobbs Merrill, 1982): "The bad news about book publishing today and in the future is that there are too many books being published." Please bear in mind that electronic publishing was still in swaddling clothes when that was written. Did Mr. Adler have some prescience? Will electronic publishing save or lose another *Absalom, Absalom* for future generations? ☞

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